



Planning & Development Committee - Public Hearing of March 22, 2021

SUPPORT: House Bill No. 6642 - AN ACT CONCERNING A STUDY OF ACCESS TO MUNICIPAL-OWNED BEACHES AND PARKS ADJACENT TO MARINE OR TIDAL WATERS.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the National Audubon Society through its affiliate state office, Audubon Connecticut. The National Audubon Society protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow, throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Our conservation network extends statewide and includes more than 31,000 members, five Connecticut chapters, and many partners along the [Atlantic Flyway](#).

Through land stewardship, science, education and advocacy, we work across the state to preserve habitat and protect bird species that are of state, national, and global concern; and we identify and support Important Bird Areas (IBAs), a hallmark of Audubon's efforts worldwide. It begins with birds, but our mission connects people to a much wider range of issues, such as preventing air and water pollution, reducing pesticide use, promoting land conservation and reducing the impact of global climate change on birds, wildlife, and people.

The strength we derive as part of the National Audubon Society enables us to contribute to a broader conservation strategy—one that recognizes the need to conserve wildlife on a wide geographic scope. See the link below for more information about Audubon nature sanctuaries and centers that are part of a broad network of critical habitats for a host of birds and other wildlife species as well as peaceful respites for people. Our centers serve as community hubs for education, conservation, and engagement with nature.

<https://ct.audubon.org/about-us/centers-sanctuaries-and-chapters>

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The COVID 19 pandemic has reminded all of us of the mental health benefits of experiencing nature. Many folks enjoy hiking trails while others find rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and Long Island Sound as places to connect to nature and for watching birds. We believe we should share our outdoor spaces with everyone and support House Bill No. 6642 as a way to begin a difficult conversation about ways to improve opportunities to experience nature, especially near our marine and tidal waters.

Unfortunately, the COVID 19 pandemic also highlighted how truly limited public access is to Long Island Sound and to land near our marine and tidal waters. An opinion piece in the CT Mirror discussed the situation.¹ And, Representative Roland Lemar introduced Proposed Bill Proposed H.B. No. 6351 - AN ACT CONCERNING ACCESS TO PUBLIC BEACHES² in response to actions taken by certain municipalities to limit public access.

House Bill No. 6642 directs the Office of Policy and Management and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to:

. . . jointly conduct a study of access by members of the public to beaches and parks adjacent to marine or tidal waters that are owned or otherwise controlled by any municipality or other political subdivision of the state. Such study shall include, but not be limited to, an examination of (1) any ordinances, regulations or other rules enacted or enforced by any such municipality or political subdivision that limit access to any such beach or park based on residency of any potential visitor, and (2) any fees or other means of limiting access that disparately impact any such potential visitor based on residency.

As we think about how to adapt to climate change, we should also consider who is able to enjoy access to our municipal marine and tidal areas. Recently, the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3) entitled, *Taking Action on Climate Change and Building a More Resilient Connecticut for All Phase 1 Report: Near-Term Actions January 2021* made recommendations to the Governor for action.³

Integrating a conversation about public access to municipal marine and tidal areas into our coastal adaptation and resilience planning makes sense. Audubon Connecticut is working to protect our coasts⁴ and to engage future leaders in coastal conservation⁵.

A broader base of constituents--who appreciate our coastal resources--will only enhance our shared commitment to solve the problems associated with climate adaptation and resilience. Expanding in person access to the natural beauty of our coastal resources will only strengthen our coastal constituency.

Recent enactment of Connecticut's Passport to the Parks has moved our state closer to universal and safe access to our state parks. Hopefully, passage of this bill will move forward a much-needed conversation about universal and safe access to municipal marine and tidal areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. Should you have any questions, please contact Robert LaFrance, Director of Policy, Audubon Connecticut, National Audubon Society, at 203.668.6685 or at Robert.LaFrance@Audubon.org.

¹ <https://ctmirror.org/category/ct-viewpoints/free-the-beaches-not-the-article-title-andrew-kahl/>

² https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/CGABillStatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Bill&bill_num=HB6351

³ https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/climatechange/GC3/GC3_Phase1_Report_Jan2021.pdf

⁴ <https://ct.audubon.org/conservation/salt-marsh-projects-connecticut-aim-create-more-resilient-coastline>

⁵ <https://ct.audubon.org/conservation/wildlife-guards-connecticuts-high-school-conservation-leaders>